FOREIGN POLICY
Winter 1984-85

DATELINE LANGLEY: FIXING THE INTELLIGENCE MESS

by Allan E. Goodman

The recent campaign for the White House marked the third straight presidential election in which the American intelligence community's performance was a major issue. From their memoirs it is clear that Presidents Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski all left office thinking intelligence had not served them well. Moreover, ever since the debacle in Iran the Senate and House select committees on intelligence have been sharply critical of the substantive briefings they have received from the intelligence agencies.

As early as 1981, the Reagan administration's disappointment was underscored by Admiral Bobby Inman, the country's most senior and respected career military intelligence officer and deputy director of central intelligence until 1982. Inman told several audiences that the U.S. intelligence community's performance was at its lowest level since Pearl Harbor. And in the wake of the most recent bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, President Ronald Reagan himself expressed concern about "the near destruction of our intelligence capability," which presidential spokesman Larry Speakes blamed on "a decade-long trend of a climate in Congress that resulted in inadequate funding and support for intelligence gathering capabilities."

Intelligence and foreign-policy professionals should take such criticism seriously, despite the political circumstances and motives that may have generated it. Many intelligence operatives have left the profession wondering if the community has become too fragmented. Sophisticated collection technologies have actually impeded the sharing of information. And rival agencies in stiff competition for funding prepare such divergent analyses that the system fails to provide enough accurate, timely, or complete information to policymakers. Unfortunately, such problems have plagued the intelligence community for more than a decade and are so deeply rooted that only fundamental change in the system will improve performance.

The intelligence community comprises the agencies and organizations specifically authorized by the National Security Act of 1947 and subsequent executive orders to conduct intelligence activities "necessary for the conduct of foreign relations and the protection of the National Security of the United States." The current members of the community all fall within the executive branch and report to the director of central intelligence (DCI), the National Security Council (NSC), and the president—in that order. The community includes the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the National Security Agency (NSA), the military service and special collection offices in the Pentagon, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the Treasury Department's Office of Intelligence Support, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and a unit of the Department of Energy. The CIA, however, is the only agency controlled directly by the DCI.

Intelligence activities revolve around four functions. The first, intelligence gathering, includes human intelligence (HUMINT), photography, and the processing of electronic and communications signals (ELINT and COMINT). The second and third functions involve analyzing information and getting the results to those who need them. The fourth function is covert action. While controversial, it represents only a minor part of intelligence activities and despite controversy and mistakes is generally better managed than either the collection or the analytic functions. Thus a central concern is whether information collected in the field is properly analyzed and reaches the right people in a usable form.

What policymakers expect and need from

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